

Asian Influence in Australian Art: Cultural Exchanges and Multicultural Trends

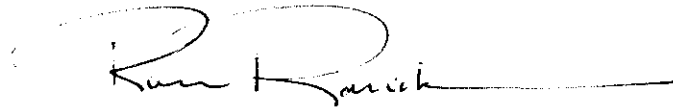
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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## Abstract:

Settled as a Western outpost in the middle of an Eastern world, Australia has faced many interesting and unique issues in economic, cultural, political and social matters. Australia has faced a two century long identity crisis as its primary influence has shifted from Great Britain to America and more recently to Asia, namely China.

Economic necessity has forced Australia to turn to Asian countries for trade partnerships, but due to a less than pleasant history involving harsh racism, those Asian countries are less than inviting. This ominous atmosphere has had a profound affect of Australian art. Artists in Australia are generally politically astute and are aware of the need to open up cultural doors. Many are using their art to create intellectual dialogue involving countries all over the Asia-Pacific region. I discuss these artistic trends, focusing on the fields of painting, sculpture, and ceramics. Individual artists are highlighted throughout the paper as the concept of cultural exchange exhibitions is emphasized.

### Acknowledgements:

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I would like to thank Maurie Ryann for introducing me to several local Australian artists and giving me privileged access to a wonderful library facility in Lismore.

I would also like to thank all the artists and art aficionados that I conversed with throughout my three months in Australia. Although many of them were not mentioned exclusively in this paper, their insights helped me to understand the cultural climate in Australia and without their sometimes overbearing opinions I would not have known where to start.

Kimberly Stapleton  
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## Asian Influence in Australian Art

Most Australian contemporary artists respond to the fact that they are part of the Asian world in various ways, centering mainly around the participation and dedication to exhibitions which focus on the concept of cultural exchange, the inclusion of specifically Asian techniques in individual works, and incorporating personal ethnic origins, as many artists in Australia are of some Asian decent. Australian painters and sculptors in particular are interested in opening up the lines of communication in order to establish intellectual and artistic discussion/dialogue. Often these artists are involved and engaged in local and national politics. Thus, the interest in cultural exchange may stem from Australia's current political and economic situations. Australian ceramicists face a slightly different challenge. There is a matter of defending their art from being shoved off into a category of mere craft, unworthy of the intellectual and artistic dialogue in which other fine artists partake. Many Australian ceramicists draw extensively from Japanese wares, highlighting still the influence of Asia across the board.

In order to understand the artistic climate in Australia, especially in

regards to its inclusion in the Asian world, one must first look at the history of interaction between these two different atmospheres. Although Australia likens itself to an egalitarian, multicultural mecca, holding no prejudices of any kind, it is important to note that Australia was founded by the British as a western outpost in the Asia-Pacific world and much hatred and racism has flourished throughout the years. Ties to Mother Britain dictated all aspects of early Australia, shackling it to the West even though it resides in the middle of the East. Early settlement consisted of European convicts at first. In later years when immigration became necessary for labor purposes, Australia faced its first direct encounter with Asians. A massive gold rush in the 1850s brought many workers over, namely from China. They were despised and feared by the Australians and hatred thrived for years. Asian immigrants in particular were a focus of racism due to their distinctive appearance. Different ethnic groups segregated themselves into small ghettos and hatred spread among them. In 1901, when the Australian Federation was formed, immigration was controlled by the nation rather than individual colonies, providing more power to regulate and/or keep out all non-whites. Australia nationhood thrived off the concept of "White Australia," making non-white immigration virtually non-existent under the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901. The two world wars brought much change to Australia's immigration policies and patterns. "White Australia" continued to flourish throughout post-war politics. Australia feared the Asian nations and wanted to populate its coasts with European immigrants for labor and defense purposes. The Immigration Minister at the time, Arthur Calwell, believed that "'aliens' from Europe were

preferable to 'aliens' closer to home," referring to their Asian neighbors (Bullbeck, Carter, 82). He instilled the fear of "Yellow Peril" and was responsible for the deportation of non-whites who had even married Australians, often quoting, "Two Wongs don't make a White" (Jayasuriya, Pookon, 88). It wasn't until the 1970s that this policy was displaced. New Immigration Minister Al Grassby believed that immigration must be based on their being no discrimination on grounds of race, color of skin, or country of origin. Author Michael Ignatieff asserted that, "the nation should be composed of all those. . . who subscribe to the nation's political creed. This nationalization is called civic because it envisages the nation as a community of equal, rights-bearing citizens, united in patriotic attachment to a shared set of political practices and values" (Jayasuriya, Pookon, 90). This idealistic approach is the philosophical theory behind the work of many contemporary Australian artists.

The new open-mindedness toward immigration policies coincides with a considerable shift in Australia's cultural lifeways. Australia was nearly forced to look for economic support outside of Britain. In 1973, Britain joined the growing European Economic Community, thus focusing trade only within Europe, rather than attempting to be an empire trader. This shift greatly affected Australia, as Britain was her main trading partner. Logically, Australia began to mend economic ties with Asian countries, otherwise the country would face an economic crisis. However, most Asian countries remain even today hesitant to include Australia, noting the past discrimination that leaked into the political arena. A visit to China by Prime Minister Whitlam in the late 1970s did ease

some tension. The acts of Prime Ministers Hawke and Keating in the 1980s and 1990s also aided in dressing old wounds between influential Asian nations and Australia. Yet, the public did not take a liking to this turn to Asia. Australians began to fear the loss of a national identity because of the emphasis on Asian relations. The term "Asianisation" of Australia became a household word spoken with concern and disapproval. Ien Ang author of Alter/Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, and Jon Stratton, author of Race Daze: Australia in Identity Crisis, both insist on Australia and Asia being separate and even opposite as they represent the West and the East. They state that, "where 'Asia' was discursively constructed as the Orient, that Other against which 'the West' defined itself, 'Australia' was constructed as a settled outpost of 'the West', an attempt to realize a society on the principles of European modernity in a space outside Europe" (2000).

Melissa Chiu, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Asia Society in New York, and her colleagues would disagree with the binary to which Ang and Stratton adhere. Chiu insists that while Ang and Stratton's conception of the binary relationship appears to be a familiar and reliable model of engagement between Australia and Asia, it is also reliant upon a mutual identification with the broader terms of East and West. Ang and Stratton both would agree that the relationship between Australia and Asia is more complex than an East versus West philosophical split simply because of Australia's geographic location. Chiu, however asserts that, "the problem with a general theory based on such binaries, is that it doesn't allow for a consideration of any of the subtleties or contradictions

inherent in the relationship. One of the specific limitations of this binary logic is a lack of acknowledgment of regional differences within Australia” (2001). One such regional difference within Australia can be seen in the far north of Queensland as well as the Northern Territory. Such areas have a high proportion of Asian immigrants. Often times foreign settlers will form their own cultural circles within a community, remaining distant yet still engaged in local and national affairs. Such areas are currently seeing an influx of other diverse populations such as Indonesians, Malaysians and Filipinos, as opposed to primarily Chinese. Chiu suggests that their presence might indicate a different model of relations between Australia and Asia.

Another problem with the East vs. West polarity can be seen when Australia’s perception of Asia is examined. Because Australia insisted on maintaining a Western framework in the Eastern world, tensions arose. Europeans did not encounter the threat of Asia as Australia did from as far back as the 1800s. This threat increased with Britain’s inconsiderate protection, rather, failure to protect, during the two world wars. In this sense, Australia’s perception of Asia differed significantly from Britain’s. Another example of this difference can be noted when observing the European fascination with quoting Asian art. Japonisma and Chinoiserie were two terms referring to this concept of using Asian artistic and cultural concepts as a European art canon. During the time when Europe was becoming engulfed and romanced by this exotic and ‘other’ art practice, Australian artists had just begun to experiment with Impressionism in an attempt to become even more European. This signifies more



than a mere lapse in time, as art trends are delayed by the distance of the seas. The contrast of perspective is what is to be noted. While Europe was fascinated with Asia, Australia ignored and even feared it, making Australia starkly different from the West.

Eastern influence was easily noted during the time when Japonisma and Chinoserie flourished. However, most critics would agree that Western influences in Asian art and Asian influences in Western art are so centuries-long embedded, so absorbed and integrated within habitual practice as to have become barely distinguishable, even in the art of the modern (late colonial) period ([www.shermangalleries.com](http://www.shermangalleries.com)). However, contemporary Australia in its 'post-colonial' relationships with Asia, has now entered a new, dynamic, increasingly integrated phase in the visual arts.

At a conference in Brisbane, artists from all over the Asia-Pacific region gathered to discuss the developments of art in the region over the past decade and the direction in which it was heading. A common trend in contemporary art is the combination of drawing on respective cultural traditions while still engaging in the social, political, and technological structures that have contributed to globalization. A growing theme among Australian artists involves reinforcing knowledge of the survival of cultures and demonstrates how the art emerges from diverse cultural traditions as well as reflecting contemporary issues. Australian artists use their work to confront and even refute the notion of a global sameness; they seek to open up challenges for Western art historians in terms of future directions and developments of the art world. As noted in the International

Institute for Asian Studies newsletter, speakers at this conference stressed the necessity of exploring the contexts in which the art is produced and the need for a more sophisticated understanding of diverse cultural traditions. Australian artists in general are interested in the renewal and evolution of those traditions, the long histories in the region of cultural engagement over the centuries, and the complexity of the intermarriage of ancient tradition with more recent modern encounters with the West. The relevance of the concepts of post-colonialism and post-modernism to this region were challenged as was the idea of an experience of modernity giving way to post-modernism, especially in Asia, as well as the idea of ownership of these concepts by the West.(IIAS Newsletter. 📄)

Because of the emerging global culture, artists are becoming more and more interested in using their work to ignite intellectual debate regarding multiculturalism, hence Australia's interest in Asian influences. International artists have been confronted with new questions as the economic and political arenas have suffered crises. Artists reflect these issues in their work; many happen to be directly involved with their communities in raising awareness of issues such as poverty, civil war, the role of women in Asian societies, environmental depredation, urbanization, and social dislocation. Speakers at the Queensland conference pointed to the need for ethnic and cultural understanding, and to the continuing importance of community, family, religion, and spirituality.

## ***Asian-Australian Artists***

Since Australia is a land characterized by immigrants and displaced people, aside from the original inhabitants, assimilation and absorption have made it a complicated, pluralistic society. The blending and meshing of cultures with tolerance and acceptance has been successful, resulting in a complex web of multiculturalism. This makes for a dynamic emerging art scene. Australia's recent economic need to open communication with Asian countries has also affected the visual arts arena. Many uprooted Asian artists have settled in Australia and continue making art and engaging in society. As a general statement, it seems as though Asian-Australian artists have a particular interest in cultural understanding. They desire to see art dynamically integrated with the world around them. Although prejudices still exist, these up-and-coming, ambitious artists have become an imperative ingredient in the cultural and artistic life of Australia. Dr. Gene Sherman, of the Sherman Galleries in Sydney, would point out that since these artists originated in a land outside the one in which they now reside, they are able to take advantage of the opportunity for self-awareness by 'contradistinction' to the adopted culture. Additionally, he says they can benefit from exposure to the diverse ideas and philosophies on art that color the Australian social environment. Of this dynamic atmosphere, Sherman says, "There is clearly no other county in modern times where such a proliferation of peoples from so many places has been accommodated so tranquilly into a new and inclusive national social fabric with such remarkable creative output,"

([www.shermangalleries.com](http://www.shermangalleries.com)).

One artist contributing to this creative output is the young Shijo Wong. Known as Steve to his Western friends, Shijo lived in China for the first three years of his life, after which his parents immigrated to Australia. Even though Shijo has never fully known anything outside his Australian lifestyle, he is still typecast as an Asian-Australian artist. The term itself implies a racial prejudice; it forces a descriptive title on an individual that carries with it many stereotypes. While Shijo's parents emphasize the importance of being proud of your heritage, he wishes to create his own identity apart from Chinese stereotypes. "I'm a child of immigrants. I will never escape that and, coincidentally, my art will never escape that either. But I'm putting down my roots here because this is the land I love." (interview Feb. 2004). Often times, immigrants and their children will have a deeper appreciation and sense of connectedness to their new land because they originated outside of it. This enables them to have an unobscured view of their new culture. Steve takes proud ownership of Australia although he was not born there. In this sense, Asian-Australian artists maintain a strong connection and conviction to enriching the culture of the home they love. The validity of that connection has been questioned by those involved in the re-emergence of the "White Australia" attitude. Pauline Hanson, a national politician, claimed that Australians who like the Asian culture so much to "go live over there" (quoted in Clark 1998). As Gene Sherman would note, such expressions lack the awareness that non-indigenous Australia have always been comprised of a series of distinct and imported cultures with conflicting and compromised

lineages of affiliation abroad and at home.

Another way of resisting the Hansonite negation of going and living 'over there' is to bring what's there to live 'over here'. Contemporary Australian artists have adopted this as their battle cry. However, the Asian-Australian artist in particular must come to terms with the advantages and disadvantages of multicultural subjectivity. This refers to the cross-cultural consciousness that arises from cultural transformations that have taken place within and without the migrant individual, when subjected to the dominance of mainstream culture. For migrant artists, the style is the key to survival. For the individual multicultural subject, the condition of existence means constant 'multiple belonging' linguistically, culturally, socially and politically. The condition of multiple belonging is a blessing and a cause of problems at the same time. The individual needs to be very adaptable and flexible to fully enjoy and benefit from this multicultural subjectivity. The process of cultural globalization and transformation happens through individual, personal experiences. Multicultural subjects are the sites where cultural transformation takes place, and it extends from the personal to the communal and ultimately to the societal.

As mentioned earlier, Shijo Wong is a prime example of such a multicultural subject. With the growing number of Asian-Australian artists, the Australian art world is becoming more complex. The main recurring problem with multicultural subjects is the tendency to overemphasize cultural heritage. While many artists prefer to create work with this as their subject matter, many do not. Shijo Wong is one amateur artist who would fall into the latter category. His work

is constantly being related back to his birthplace although that interpretation is entirely irrelevant. This practice has affects that limit an artist's audience thus shrinking the artist's ability to communicate ideas and participate in important cultural dialogues. A timely warning against the application of such an interpretive model is given by Ang, who states that when "the question of 'where you're from' threatens to overwhelm the reality of 'where you're at', the idea of diaspora becomes a dispowering one"(87). The work of Asian-Australian artists must be interpreted within an Australian idiom (where they're at) rather than necessarily an Asian culture (where they're from). Interestingly, as Chiu points out, when one examines these Asian-Australian artists as a group, it becomes evident that they possess more differences in terms of their cultural background and biographical history than similarities (Chiu 1999).

Ethnic aesthetics is ultimately monitored and subjected to the dominant, mainstream aesthetics of Australian society, whose will and selection power reside in its cultural agencies and funding bodies. For the migrant artists there is the need to conform to, and integrate into the mainstream; but there is also the demand to retain and to accentuate their differences. Artworks by multicultural individuals are often interpreted as manifestations of a society's multicultural reality. The cases of Guan Wei and Shen Jiawei, two Asian-Australian artists who have received very different responses from the Australian art world, show that to be a successful migrant, one needs to hold the 'right' cultural capital, such as belonging to the elite of the homeland, and therefore being a 'legitimate owner' of the specific ethnic culture. For a society interested in consuming

'Other' cultures, artworks need to be 'cultured' to the tastes of the mainstream (Ang 215). The style and the self under multiculturalism are intricately connected, with the self largely determined by the style. Guan Wei and Shen Jiawei's personal experience, their relationship to Australian mainstream society, the content and style of their artistic expressions are all highly indicative of the limits of multiculturalism and the blind spots of universal aesthetics. Obviously multiculturalism opens doors only to those who happen to be in tune with the mainstream tastes.

When and how can a migrant of 'ethnic' cultural background become Australian in the cultural and social sense? Under multiculturalism, ethnicity often defines cultural and social identities of the individual of the communities, who are frequently turned into state-owned multicultural symbols, deprived of their own voices. A concern with national identity has always doffed multicultural policies and immigration policies in Australia (Jayasuriya, Pookon 1998). Consequently, when the individual's cultural and social identities are derived exclusively from one's ethnic identity, one is "forced into the straight jacket of ethnic cultural belonging, although one's ethnic origin does not necessarily follow one's cultural and social identifications" (Cotton, Ravenhill 2001).



**Ah Xian. China Series**

1997-1999

Porcelain body-cast, with hand painted underglaze and overglaze decoration

In the same way, when cultural traditions become descriptive of individual identity, ethnicity can be repressive, as it is often used to confine and restrict the cultural, political or religious identity of the individual. In this sense, identity politics under multiculturalism can be an exercise in marginalisation, as was the case with Shijo Wong.

The experience of both Shen and Guan speak of the involvement in art activities from both Chinese and Australian governments. Both Shen and Guan have taken Australian citizenship. Both did so after a substantial period of hesitation. Shen increasingly identifies himself as an Australian, as a conscious citizen of Australian society. As he did in China, he participates in local politics through his art and he voices his opinions through his representation of prominent social and historical figures. However, in many ways, he still waits for acknowledgement of his Australian-hood. His work, perhaps not as interesting to the contemporary scene, has its foundation in portraying historical events.

Therefore, he does not qualify for immediate acceptance into the Australian art world. He does not employ the popular

cultural ingredients. He cannot be

Australia's trophy multiculturalist artist,

and would not wish for such a title; thus,

he is largely overlooked. In Guan's case,

art critics and bureaucrats conveniently

drop his Chinese ethnicity so that he

becomes Australian for the multicultural



Guan Wei. *Neo-Genesis No. 1*. 1998  
acrylic on canvas. 3 parts, 127 x 170cm



nationhood. Guan Wei is a chosen sample of official multiculturalism. On the one hand, he retains the interest of many art scholars and curators. On the other hand, China experts, such as Nicholas Jose and Geremie Barmé, remain interested in him. The very attention from sinologists returns Guan Wei to his Chineseness—if not his Chinese nationality, at least his Chinese ethnicity and cultural belonging (Cotton, Ravenhill 110). The contradiction between self-identification and publicly imposed identities demonstrates another aspect of multicultural politics in which the individual migrant has little to say.

Therefore, the central problem of today's global interaction is the tension between homogenization and heterogenization. In response to Asian contemporary art: the diverse landscape of expression shares a common ground in a kind of collective consciousness of socio-cultural reform, a critical reconsideration of Asian, namely Chinese and Japanese, history and politics, the pursuit of individual freedom, and the desire to become 'internationalized' and globally significant. In the 1990s Asian art has entered a period of direct encounter, confrontation, negotiation, and exchange with the western-dominated international art world, its institution, markets, and media. Any artist seeking to apply Asian influence in their work must deal with the supremacy of these institutions. A new market has risen for such art. One of the main reasons is that the West has discovered specifically China as a fresh, enormous and highly profitable market. In addition, looking for 'the new' —which occasionally includes the 'exotic other'—has always been part of the logic of capitalist economy and culture. However, what has been most often presented and promoted as

'Chinese avant-garde' is work like political pop or cynical realism that corresponds to western clichés of 'exotic China' (Allen 1998). Chinese art is often regarded first as 'Chinese', rather than as art. In other words, Chinese art is supposed to remain 'Other' to the global art scene, even while it is increasingly being presented internationally.

Although this increase in the popularity and display of Asian contemporary art is encouraging, many artists have mixed feelings about engaging in the Western-dominated art world. On the one hand, they confirm the necessity to search for a space for expressions that are both personal and universally significant. On the other hand, they recognize it is now time to restructure the art world and create a genuinely global scene. This does not mean a search for cultural 'purity' or 'originality' but rather a process of 'differance' (to use Derrida's term, which refers to how language never contains or conveys full meaning; meaning is always deferred and different.), so that different cultures can produce different interpretations while opening up a mid-ground beyond the old order of nation-states and the separation between east and west. It is in such a process that a new art which is truly global—implying the perpetual tension and movements between the global and local—can be imagined and developed, a place where the global and local overlap each other, a place which can be called 'glocal' (McDonald 2000). Envisioning such a midground, one can discover a new means to re-read the history of modernity as genuinely global, with contributions from different cultures. One can also predict a future in which influences,

interaction, and stimulations of both dominated and 'established' cultures will encourage the birth of a post-national space.

As the Asia-Pacific Triennial catalogue points out, Asian artists who have chosen to live and work in Western societies, namely Australia, continue to provide information and other resources to activate the imagination of their colleagues at home, while also acting as a new avant-garde, and creating a new ethnoscape in Western societies in order to give birth to a genuinely global art. Their diasporic experience allows them to absorb the inspiration from the shifting environments, events and ideas of the outside world, while reconsidering the values and aesthetics they learned in the past. Curator Hon Hanru would say that many of them are becoming the most active artists in the international art arena. "They call themselves 'spiritual runaways'. It is this 'running away' that they reposition their lives and their art in a global context. Such a transexperience helps them look for new languages or expressions to materialize their imaginations and questions in this rapidly-shifting world" (Hanru in Sear 2000).

Migration is an intensified cross-cultural experience and it can be both reductive and enriching for the migrant individual. 'Multicultural subjectivity' is both inner fragmentation and external identification. It is the status of being here and there at the same time and being the self and the other in the same place. Socially, the change of nationality into ethnicity is very often a direct fall into the marginal and a sharp drop in social/class status. Culturally, assimilation and segregation entail intellectual confusion as well as artistic inspirations. As Allen

implies, ethnicity erases differences in class, gender, relation, very often against the wishes of the individual, as migrant frequently find themselves grouped as the ethnic versus the national. Multiculturalism has become a discourse broadcasted by governments to encourage 'racial tolerance' and social harmony. In a society where certain cultures dominate, multiculturalism can be highly deceptive, for it is often the case that the minority cultures become decorative of the mainstream's tolerance and generosity. Multiculturalism is often used to 'color in' Australia's national identity, however 'white' the nation is. (Allen 2001). Hopefully in this process the migrants are able to negotiate some creative autonomy for themselves.

### ***Cultural Exchange Exhibitions***

Politically and economically, Australia must establish significant and lasting ties with Asian countries once again. This has become a major priority to the Australia government. Because this is such a significant national issue, government funding and support for art that initiates a more open relationship has increased. Stereotypically, it often seems that the art world and the political world rarely have the same goals. In Australia, however, such is the case, and all are benefiting.

Australia's cultural engagement with Asian has, more often than not, been conceived as art history, both through exhibitions and the development of collections. The visual arts of Asia have been presented to Australians as a variety of cultures with a past rich in tradition and bountiful with objects which

affirm that. The dynamics of change, identities, and even 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural dislocation as revealed through contemporary art have only recently attracted attention and indeed are highlighted by many long-running exhibitions including the Asia-Pacific Triennial, the Sydney Biennial, Gallery 4A exhibitions, and the Rose Crossing.

The Queensland Art Gallery has a strong commitment to building collections and presenting exhibitions of the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In determining ways in which the Gallery could contribute to the exhibition and collection of art of the region, the Asia-Pacific Triennial was conceived. It broke the pattern of art museums' preoccupation with the past; defined a way, in both intellectual and organizational terms, in which Australia might construct a relevant forum for the presentation of Asian and Pacific contemporary art; and reaffirmed the Gallery's commitment to international programs of current international and domestic relevance. This exhibition has risen immensely in popularity in Australia. The most recent installation was entitled "Beyond the Future." The exhibit succeeded in taking steps to create an international dialogue, as have many other similar ongoing exhibitions in the area.

There are excellent collections of historical Asian art within Australia, a growing awareness in Australia of the contemporary art and art practice of the region, and a number of important initiatives in the Australia Council's new policy of directing much of its international funding towards Asia. Australia's engagement with Asia over the last twenty years has increased dramatically and now there is a trend of establishing major exhibitions focusing on the art of Asia

and the Pacific (Sear 2000). Australia's interest in contemporary regional art is genuine and growing and the exchange exhibition is the evidence.

As with many aspects of Asian art, Australians have viewed the Pacific cultures through Western discovery, as an exotic location romanticized through the depiction of an idealized Pacific utopia, possessing a geographic and climatic splendor, unchanging or, at best, complementing an Arcadian paradise (Browinowski 2003). Perhaps museums have helped reinforce this perception by presenting their material culture as somewhat static and not revealing the effects of change, whether this be self-determined or that affected by external sources. It is a complex arena and one which future exhibitions, Asian-Pacific Triennial in particular, plan to address.

The goal of these cultural exchanges is to grow into a forum for expanding and presenting the diverse methods of art practice within Asia and the Pacific. A project such as this gives the opportunity to provide a new approach to the interpretation of art away from the Western modernist tradition, and to reveal an art that can be regionally specific while expressing ideas and issues within an international context and with international relevance. The typical cultural exchange exhibition is to be viewed as a facilitator for debate and ideas. There should not be any fixed or closed curatorial position. They should be undertaken on the basis of intellectual equality to disclose knowledge and experience regardless of cultural, social or spiritual differences.

The Asian-Pacific Triennial, being the most popular in Australia, has received criticism for attempting to create a homogenous art scene within the

Asian-Pacific region. While this was never the intent of the Triennial, this part of the world is establishing contexts for intraregional cooperation and, given its growing political, strategic, and economic significance, it is inevitable that its contemporary cultures and art, which in turn mirror the dynamic changes now so characteristic of the region, should receive greater global attention (Sear 2000). What is apparent is that the artists within this region are confident in their local and regional specificity as well as in incorporating ideas which cross national boundaries—an art which engages with international art practice but is not dependent on international ideas imposed from a ‘center’.

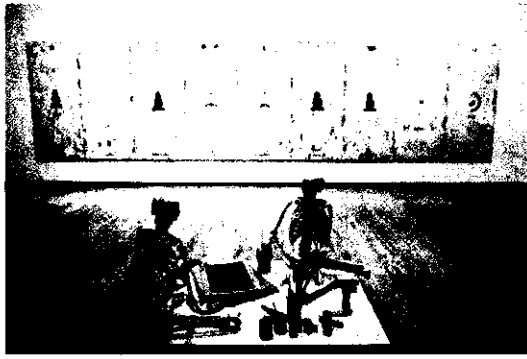
It is an irony that the West has accepted the great achievements of the art of this region of the distant past but has on the whole paid too little attention to the immediate past and the present. The West has almost entirely ignored the fascinating story of the adoption of new ideas and their effect in art. Western modern art critics have largely been interested only in the development of Western ideas in the art of the region. They have judged this art by its integration of a Western tradition. Their interpretation has too often been a product of cultural assumptions, for example, in the way Western art critics have seen Western abstraction in Asian art without taking into account possible Eastern art approaches; or in the overemphasis of a socioeconomic context rather than a mystical-aesthetic one. Cultural interaction is no new phenomenon in this region and has taken place over the centuries. This history of the region is one of cultural engagement and adaptation, which may make Western influences seem minor to future historians. ‘Cultural syncretism’ has been fundamental and

contemporary art cannot be fully understood by looking through the windows of the 'Euro-American paradigm.' Yet, this is exactly the criterion that had been applied (McDonald 2000). Many artists in Australia would claim that it is clear that, whatever the future of art in this region, it will not be dominated by Western perspectives and Western influence may well come to seem insignificant to the historians of the future.

The essays in Tradition and Change, a book published by the APT curatorial team, document the global move away from dependence on international critical approaches that was evident two and three decades ago, including in Australia. New approaches to art have been developed, some rejecting Western imperatives, and we are also now seeing other artists confident in their synthesizing of Western art approaches in the recognition that both Western and non-Western artists have been, and continue to be, inspired by each other's cultures. The writers reflect the need for pluralistic interpretations and challenge the concept of a linear progression in art. There is a forceful denial of the idea of art emanating only from major centers in Europe and North America and of an 'international style' which can now be seen as, in many ways, an aberration of the Cold War. (Cotton, Ravenhill 158).

Carol Turner, Director of the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane, asserts that, "the issues of colonialism are very much in the past and it is the present and future that engage intellectual debate and artistic endeavor. While the past in terms of history and culture is not ignored, what is called for is a method of art criticism, free from the Euro-American paradigm, not with the aim of replacing it





**Tim Johnson.** . *Dhyani Buddhas*, 2001  
synthetic polymer paint on linen.  
assisted by Karma Phuntsok, My Le Thi, and Daniel  
Bogunovic. 198x823 cm

with a new theoretical position, but with the objective of developing different perspectives” (quoted in Allen 1997). The recent shift toward these cultural exchange exhibitions reinforces the fact that there is a

decisive move away from the power of major centers and a move to a more pluralistic, inclusive structure.

Today's contemporary art is a product of tradition, past historical cultural encounters, the confrontation with the West in more modern times, continuing cross-cultural influences, and recent economic, and technological changes which have pushed the world toward a global culture (Turner in Allen 1997). Artists today have to confront a multitude of such changes in making sense out of contemporary events and many respond with passion to social and political issues within society. In some cases, artists are now refocusing on examining the uniqueness of their national identity; others go beyond identity in exploring a challenge to the precepts of modernism and to the truisms of 20<sup>th</sup> century society and global culture; the survival of myth and ritual from ancient times reaffirms the strength of cultural traditions thought lost or extinguished. Contemporary artists have a significant role to play in the complex cultural interactions of our world. Above all, the growing popularity of cultural exchange exhibitions shows the art of the region to be diverse yet at times intensely locally specific while, at the same time, engaging with international art practices. There is no sense of

homogenous regional identity, yet there are common themes that emerge from the art. Among these themes are national identity and the place of tradition with rapidly changing societies, religion and spirituality, the role of women in society, social and political concerns, and especially ecological issues and the worldwide problem of environmental degradation (Sear 2000). Many of the artists in this exhibition also take up the issues of a world moving toward a global culture in communications but at the same time reconstituting itself through local contexts of identity. It is in the connection that intraregional perspectives have a special validity.

Such exhibitions, including the APT, are beginning to insist that Euro-American perspectives are no longer valid as a formula for evaluating the art of this region. The confidence, relevance, and vitality of the art will be a revelation to many curators in the West. The opportunities for intraregional interchange generated by forums such as the cultural exchange exhibitions will, it is to be hoped, provide new ways of looking at art basis of equality without a center, as well as an approach to cultural interchange open to the future in which we can recognize what we have in common and yet respect what is different.

## Painting

Australian painters have eagerly adhered to the concept of cultural exchange. All discussed further have participated in such exhibitions and claim to be influenced either directly or indirectly by the Asian world. The desire to re-establish significant ties is rampant among painters and sculptors today.

John Young is an ambitious Australian painter whose work draws from the representation of China to other cultures. He confronts visual stereotypes and asks the viewer to come to his own conclusion. Jeremy Smith,

a Sherman Gallery spokesman, commented on John Young's work being, "translocational. He can't be confined to one specific ethnic or cultural space, which can frustrate critics at times." (interview Feb. 2004). John Young enjoys questioning cultural stereotypes and modes of representation. He emphasizes ideas of impermanence and empathizes with Asians who live diasporic lifestyles.

One such Asian is the aforementioned Guan Wei. Understanding his position within the Australian art world is critical to understanding his work. Guan Wei implements many symbolic forms that cross cultural boundaries. Like John

Young, Wei cannot be confined in one cultural space either. He maintains a humorous approach to his work, often repeating figures throughout his multi-paneled pieces. His work does not result directly from the loss that



John Young. *THE LAKE*. 2002  
digital scan and oil on linen 213 x  
159 cm



Guan Wei. 2003. *ned kelly encounters the troopers in the mystic mountains*  
ink on rice paper

occurs by living a diasporic life, rather he conveys a message that culture can be transplanted without a lot of heart-ache and drama. In fact, Wei insists

that it can even be witty. From examining his work, one can instantly see his Chinese influences. The Literati painters of the Song Dynasty in particular. These Literati painters often depicted nature scenes including mountains, rocks, rivers and skies, while maintaining a painting style free from inhibition or restriction of any sort. This freedom allowed for a rhythmic, elegant, engaging approach to painting. As Melissa Chiu points out, in Wei's work, "Images from traditional Chinese life are juxtaposed with references to international art in a playful and yet deeply serious investigation."



Guan Wei. *Floating No. 55*. 1999. Acrylic on Card  
20x25 cm.

The meanings behind Guan Wei's paintings are not decipherable even to bilingual or similar diasporic audiences with both Western and Asian backgrounds. Wei's paintings create narratives that intrigue audiences with their mystery. Many critics try to interpret his work by applying cultural learned when to argue with the critics and when to let

them believe what they will. With most Australian painters eager to expand their cultural knowledge and inclusion in their own work, Guan Wei merely seeks to continue the work he has always enjoyed, free from stereotypes, regardless of Australia's interest in multiculturalism.

John Olsen is an established Australian watercolorist who draws on the sometimes harsh Aussie landscape for inspiration for his work. However, Olsen would not claim to be merely a landscape painter. His abstracted paintings are to be interpreted by the individual. He would hope that



John Olsen. *Murray Flowing*. 2001. Mixed media on paper. 130x144cm

each could take something away different and more personal than what a mere landscape could accomplish. Throughout his time as an artist, Olsen has been interested in the way many Asian cultures perceive the relationship between humans and the land. He has written , “The Chinese are right—God is known by the example of nature. It is awfully difficult for me to follow the Hebrew-Christian tradition, apart from the Sermon on the Mount; it promises so many rewards and retribution that it appears like a folk story to me...the Chinese and Japanese through the Taoists and the Buddhists are so divinely subtle. They are first ecologists. Man is an organism related to every living thing” (www.shermangalleries.com). This view can be seen in Olsen’s recent

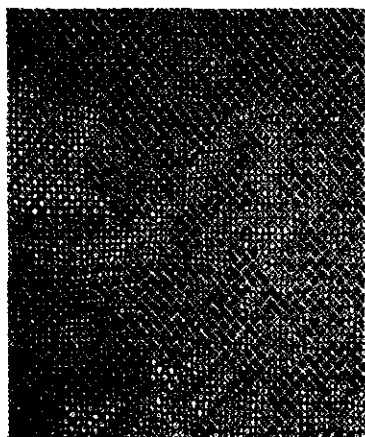


John Olsen. *Darlinghurst Cats* 1962. Oil on board 250x308.5 cm

paintings where he seeks to show that all life is interconnected. His landscapes begin to take on figurative qualities and he is even known to look for ways in which the lines of the land can be extended to form a representation of the human body. Often times his pieces imply an aerial view of a landscape with scribbles and

lines that, while being indecipherable on their own, suggest a highly diverse organic environment. This liveliness reflects Olsen's interest in the Eastern arts. As a native Australian, Olsen's interest and dedication to Asian philosophies and beliefs serves as an example of the trend in the Australian art world of looking to Asia for influence rather than with contempt.

Savanhday Vongpoothorn is another Australian painter born abroad. Hailing from Laos, Vongpoothorn's work incorporates many different elements including rich textiles that remind her of her former home. Vongpoothorn feels a strong connection to Australia and has considered it her primary home for decades. Commenting on her work, Savanhday said "The works are a synthesis of the organic and built environment. The organic environment is my connection to Australia, the sense of place and of home"



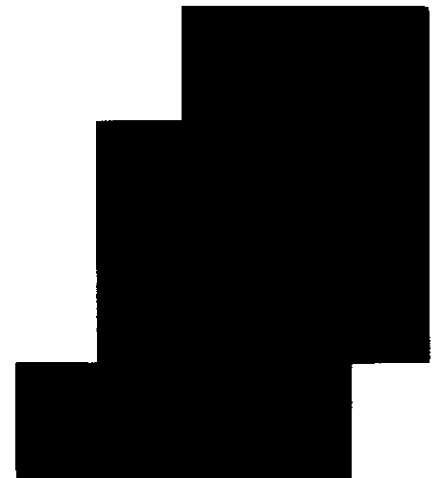
**Snake Charm**  
1998 acrylic on perforated  
canvas  
183 x 153cm

([www.shermangalleries.com](http://www.shermangalleries.com)). This is in contrast to Vongpoothorn's hard experience of living and working in the urban, built-in environment in Singapore, where she lived prior to moving to Australia. In her more recent work, Vongpoothorn has become exceptionally interested in elements and images of impermanence. Often times, her work, which can include seeds and threads and other objects, resembles Buddhist

mandalas—diagrams of the cosmos. She asserts that, "the combination of the textile surface and the visual surface, texture and optical structure, create the dialogue between permanence and impermanence, tangibility and intangibility,

organic and inorganic" ([www.shermangalleries.com](http://www.shermangalleries.com)). Vongpoothorn accomplishes this dialogue manipulating surfaces and expanding her paintings beyond the realms of mere paint. As this dialogue is being carried out, another forms just beneath the surface. Vongpoothorn's work meshes cultural boundaries and opens up a door for cultural exchange between Australia, Laos, Singapore, and beyond. In addition to her crossing the border of cultural stereotypes, Vongpoothorn also crosses the border between painting and sculpture as defined in the Western sense. Her lines and patterns and materials combine and form obvious structure and recedes off the canvas.

Similar to Vongpoothorn in ideology is Lindy Lee, a first generation Chinese-Australian. Her work addresses ideas of impermanence, just as Vongpoothorn. Lee also incorporates personal views of selfhood and diasporic loss. Often centering around the essential ideas of Zen Buddhism, Lee's work reinforces the idea of continuous change. In Zen Buddhism, the concept of 'self' is intriguing. Birth and Death do not mark the Beginning and End as is the case in Western thought, rather they signify the cyclic reality of the Zen philosophy. Lee's exploration and incorporation of this concept in her work result in captivating pieces. Lee asserts that, "in Zen terms, the actuality of 'self' can't be confined by categories of either Chinese or Anglo, and yet, unparadoxically, selfhood has a very exact form; the usual mistake is to believe that this form has permanence" (Quoted in Hughes 1996). Lee's work addresses this



Lindy Lee *Ten Worlds, Ten Directions*  
inkjet print, oil, acrylic and wax on board  
162 x 142.5cm. 20 panels

concept with confidence and the assurance of a mature artist. In the exhibitions The Secret of the Golden Flower and Birth and Death, Lee presented pieces representing members of her family. Lee includes generation lines all the way back to her early ancestors in their traditional Chinese splendor. With each generation, a difficult time of transition is being shown. Photographs of siblings reflect upon the time after the war when Australia was moving into its “White Australia” phase. The generation lines continue down to the youngest where the “purity of the Chinese blood becomes mixed with Anglo blood—giving rise to further mutability of identity and self” ([www.artspace.org.au](http://www.artspace.org.au)).

Just as Lee searches and defines herself through her art, so does Michael Nelson Jagamara. An Aboriginal elder, Jagamara uses his art as a social commentary and personal expression. The Aboriginal style of painting, containing patterns formed by repeated dots, is a deeply rooted and honorable tradition. Jagamara has recently been expanding his work beyond this traditional style to incorporate other influences, namely that of Chinese calligraphic ink paintings. Jagamara’s work still incorporates his deeply rooted traditions and tribal references, as seen in his works Bush Turkey and Traveling Rain. Jagamara is committed to tolerance and unconditional acceptance in regards to race. As an Aboriginal, he has experienced a great deal of harsh racism. Therefore, he can easily relate to his many Asian friends and offer them hospitality and sympathy. Jagamara’s open-



Travelling Rain  
Stock #FW7138  
Synthetic polymer paint on  
canvas 1200 x 895mm



mindedness enabled him to take in influences outside his tribal traditions. When he was introduced to the medium of Chinese sumi ink, Jagamara excitedly began to incorporate it in his large paintings. His Chinese friends encouraged him to regard the copious spills and ink drops produced by working quickly as an integral part of the finished painting. He often conversed with these friends about breaking out of the classical structures and binding stereotypes that restrict contemporary art so much.

Spirituality is a breathing force in Tim Johnson's work. While his landscapes center around Aboriginal design schemes, Buddhist iconography is usually present as well. He writes: "Using principles of abstraction as I learn them from Western art history and Aboriginal art, I am painting a desert landscape as it was revealed to me at Papunya . . . I am constructing images of the desert with both Aboriginal and Buddhist presence. The whole is a metaphor for city living as it can be loaded and overloaded with signs and meanings" ([www.shermangalleries.com](http://www.shermangalleries.com)). Johnson insists on meshing different cultural ideas. Blending both the Aboriginal and Buddhist philosophies in a painting executed in a Western style, Johnson produces mature work focused on the concept of cultural exchange. Johnson also participated in The Rose Crossing exhibition a few years ago. This exhibition invites cultural exchange through different interpretations of the same theme. Artists from all over the East and West were asked to read a book, The Rose Crossing, and draw upon it for a piece to be put in an exhibition designed to open up cultural doors and inspire a sophisticated discourse on the matter of cultural exchange.

## ***Sculpture***

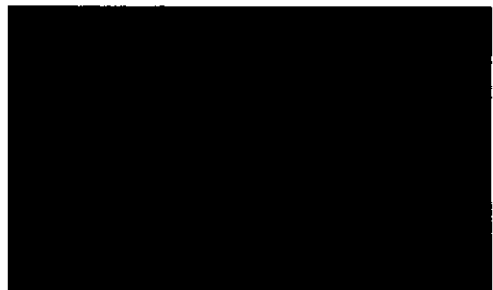
My le Thi is a sculptor who often prefers installation work. She has collaborated with Tim Johnson on several occasions. Together, the two of them create confrontational pieces that are often interactive in nature. Of her work, My le Thi says:



My Le Thi, *Transformation*, 2000, mixed media, dimensions variable

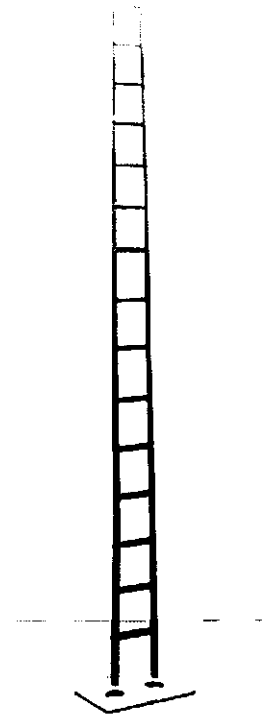
“My art happens to have a strong connection with my life, my past and my present. To make art I try and find a balance between where I am now and where I was in the past. I seek a bridge between others, and myself, a common ground for connecting the many

differences and similarities between people. Sometimes I create a specific dream in my art and use it to find an answer to my problems. I use art to create a reality and use reality to make art” (<http://www.cbs.org.tw/>). Thi and Johnson's collaborations confront the need of multicultural awareness in Australia. Their pieces often include bizarre subjects such as skeletons, UFOs, shoes and buddhas that bring a metaphorical value to the forefront of the work. Different worlds are crashing together in one place, sometimes peacefully, other times violently. The viewer must make sense out of the union of the different objects, thus opening up to the idea of multicultural subjects and cultural exchange.



My Le Thi & Tim Johnson, *Burden* 2002, mixed media, dimensions variable

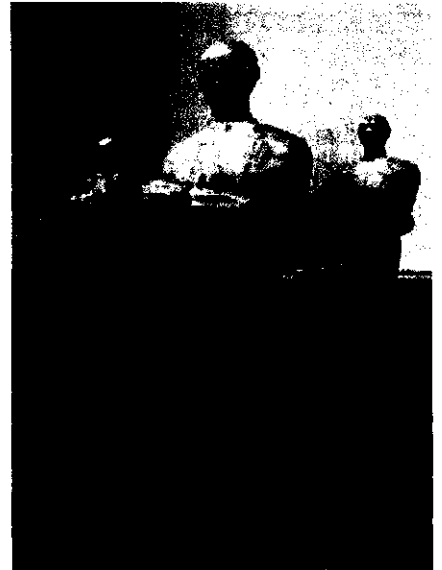
Hossein Valamanesh is another artist who crosses the boundaries between one or more mediums. He combines elements such as leaves and lead on two dimensional surfaces, a collage like work taking on aspects of a painting. Valamanesh also thrives with installation and sculptural work. He was born in Iran where the concept of paradise is seen as a lush garden atmosphere. This paradise is imitated in the elaborated and beautiful Persian rugs in which Valamanesh admires. They contain abstracted and stylized versions of plants, water, flower, trees, birds and other animals. To Valamanesh, the underside of such rugs resemble the dots in Aboriginal painting. By connecting these two ideas, these two patterns, Valamanesh is creating a dialogue between cultures. When he inquired as to whether it would be acceptable for him to incorporate this dot pattern in his own work, an Aboriginal tribe responded, "yes, but tell your own story." That is exactly what Valamanesh has set out to do with his recent work. (Hughes 1996). As an immigrant himself, Valamanesh has had to address the issues of cultural re-emplacement; the concept of remembering personal cultural heritage and finding a way to incorporate it into a new and different framework. (Clark 2001).



Hossein Valamanesh  
UNTITLED 1999  
bamboo, drawing  
book and mirrors 26 x  
38 x 300 cm

Dadang Christanto, an Indonesian born Australian artist, uses his

sculptural and installation work to inspire social change. He speaks out against international injustice through his life size piece. One installation/performance piece entitled *Fire in May 1998* involved setting fire to 47 life sized papier-maché figures. This act was to serve as a tribute to the hundred of people killed in bombings in Indonesia specifically, but can be applied to all those hurt by some act of injustice. This shocking image is directly confrontational, a prime example of an artist seeking to inspire change through his work. Christanto



Dadang Christanto detail of *They Give Evidence* 2004.

was quoted as saying, "I hope it will be a shock capable of illuminating our sense of humanity," he says. "We'll just have to leave it up to the fire and the wind. They have their own sense of wisdom." His reference to these natural elements having their own wisdom is reflective of his Eastern influence. Displaying these concepts to the Australian art world, Christanto has succeeded in merging two separate cultures and opening grounds for discussion, confrontation, and even healing. As for the lessons of the 1998 bombings, he says: "Remember history well because it offers humankind an opportunity to grow wise and compassionate - or it can transform humankind into cowards, liars and barbarians" (quoted ECCLES, 2000). Christanto's drive to open the public's eye more fully to the wrongs we commit openly. His work cries out for empathy in a desensitized world that lacks true compassion and universal morals.

Ah Xian is a Chinese sculptor who creates full size busts of Asian faces and meticulously paints traditional and Buddhist images upon the surface. His work is intriguing and solemn. The combination of a traditionally two dimensional artistic style and the three dimensional busts provides for an captivating synthesis. As a artist living in diasporic conditions,



From left to right:  
Ah Xian, *China China – Bust 34* 1999. Porcelain, underglaze paint, 42 x 40 x 22 cm. Ah Xian, *China China – Bust 35* 1999. Porcelain, underglaze paint, 40 x 39 x 21 cm. Ah Xian, *China China – Bust 50* 1999. Porcelain, underglaze and overglaze paint, 40 x 38 x 20 cm. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Jens Ziehe

Xian has many insights to multiculturalism and cultural exchanges. After fleeing from

China following the Tiananmen Square crisis, Xian made his home in Australia. As a struggling artist, Xian had much time to reflect on the events in China and his stance on his exile. Xian claims, “If I had not come to Australia I would not have had the idea,” referring to the exhibition containing 40 busts, “It was only after a few years in Australia that I had a better perspective on China” ([www.shermangalleries.com](http://www.shermangalleries.com)). Xian is personally aware of stereotypes and the assumptions made based on his ethnicity; yet he insists that he could never feel at home apart from Australia. He embraces the multicultural, pluralistic society that is beginning to thrive, and responds enthusiastically to opportunities to participate in exhibitions that promote cultural dialogue and exchange.

Bonita Ely is Australian native who, along with Sue Pedley, Glen Clarke, and other Australia sculptors, participated in a symposium in Vietnam in 1998.

The culture shock they experienced there continues throughout all of their respective works. They have exhibited together in a show entitled

“Reverberations,” referring to the lasting impression Vietnam made on their styles. Bonita, in particular, responded significantly to Taoist traditions and practices. She especially appreciated the improvisational qualities of the



Bonita Ely. Detail from *Inside Mawson's Sleeping Bag*. 2003

culturally significant calligraphic characters that often appear in Vietnamese architecture. Bonita claims, “Vietnam and other parts of Asia have stimulated me to focus on exploring cultural icons and motifs” ([www.vov.org.vn](http://www.vov.org.vn)) More recently, Ely has placed herself in empathetic positions and has made art for the sake of other people’s hardships. In *Inside Mawson’s Sleeping Bag*, for example, Ely depicts the historic and heroic journey of Sir Douglas Mawson to Antarctica in conjunction with the plight of the Aboriginals during a period in history when children were stolen from their homes and forced to assimilate to white culture, known as the Stolen Generation. The juxtaposition of these two events seems random and unrelated; however, their synthesis creates a strong and poetic statement about a skewed history and a people who continue to suffer harmful injustice. Ely’s determination to speak out for the Aboriginals is a huge step in restoring a healthy relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous inhabitants, as much hostility still remains even today.

Sue Pedley's influence from Vietnam stemmed mainly from the excessive amounts of bamboo that can be found there. The culture utilized the plant in countless ways. Pedley's work typically involves a great deal of extensive research during which she engulfs herself in history, cultural, materials and other activities related to the topic or site in which she plans to work. For The Sound of Bamboo exhibition, Pedley incorporated Vietnamese thread with the bamboo along with sound to create a synthesis of nature and art and specific cultural emphasis. She is interested in incorporating ambient sound into her work, insisting that sound adds a profound affect on installation art and insights would be lost without it in many cases.



Sue Pedley. Detail from *Sound of Bamboo*. 1998

Glen Clarke's work was reshaped by Vietnam as well. He claims that it was exceptionally difficult to move from a Western based perception of art and art history to an Eastern one. The experience opened his eyes to unnecessary separations of cultures laced with stereotypes many are unwilling to confront. For the "Reverberation" exhibit, Clarke presented a hanging installation piece containing nearly eight thousand origami folded paper shirts made out of ceremonial Vietnamese currency. The repetition of these elements provides meaning beyond the surface. Clarke asserts that the key element is the distance between all of these hanging objects. They represent physical, cultural, and



Glen Clarke. Minute folded paper shirts made from ceremonial Vietnamese currency.  
"Reverberations exhibit 1998

emotional space. He claims, "Vietnam echoes this theme for me. It is culturally distant, but emotionally close"

([www.vov.org.vn](http://www.vov.org.vn)). Clarke's work is yet another example of the growing trend in the Australian art world of crossing cultural borders and opening up doors for imperative dialogue centering around the concept of exchange.



## ***Ceramics***



Anagama kiln

The field of ceramics in Australia faces an exclusively different problem than that of the other arts. Clay work has been the center of the Fine Art vs. Craft debate for decades, and it continues today in Australia. Ceramicists down under all seem to adhere to this quote from Jack Menzies, head of the Asian Curatorial Department in Sydney: "With Asian art, you don't have the definition we do in the West, which confines art to painting, sculpture, and architecture. That's a Renaissance thing. Pre-renaissance, the gold-smiths were regarded as the greatest artists. Asia never had that break. So, for example, a lot of Japanese sculptural energy goes into the making of a tea bowl." To a potter, the profound act of making a simple utilitarian object cannot be disregarded and tossed out of the fine arts loop.

The humanizing aspect of pottery and the warmth that a potter who works with clay and fire in a natural way can bring to the arts has been long espoused by Peter Rushforth. The direction that Rushforth follows in philosophically linked with function, naturalness and truth to the material and processes of making pots.

"I see individually made pottery, by its nature, dealing with human values and hence the values that are expressed in such work are

antithetical to the values of machine-made products" he writes,

"it is the hand product, if it is successful, that can counteract the dehumanizing influence that so often accompanies high

technology". Rushforth believes the subject of pottery is so

vast that most potters eventually "come to the conclusion that in

one lifetime it is only possible to develop a limited number of

techniques to professional levels and hopefully to use these

techniques creatively. The direction I have chosen is wheel-

thrown high-fired stoneware, usually wood fired under a reducing flame. The

origin of these glazes can be traced to China and Japan but such influences can

be only a starting point in using glazes that are unique to one's environment; the

materials that are local, the design of the kiln and the way it is fired. I have

chosen the vessel form as a means of expression. I find that the subtleties,

nuances and variations of wheel-thrown pots are endless and throwing pots is for

ever a challenge in producing forms that are aesthetically pleasing. But apart

from all that, I make pottery because I find joy in making pots"

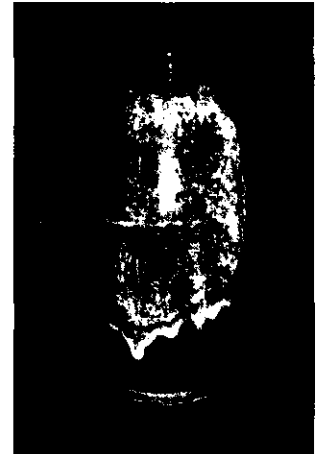
A teacher for 27 years at the national art school, East Sydney Technical College,

and a potter during, before, and since that time, Peter Rushforth has exhibited

widely throughout Australasia and also in Japan. Reviewers refer to his authentic

attitude to an ancient craft and his interpretations of classical and European

traditions believing that his work has created a wider circle of aesthetics of the



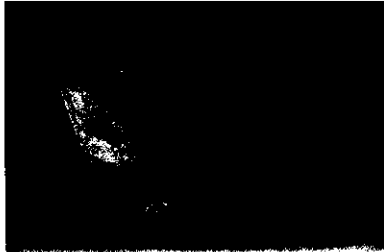
Peter Rushforth  
Blossom Jar. ceramic  
Height 36 cms

potter's art. A review of a major show at David Jones Gallery in 1990 published in the Sydney Morning Herald said that Rushforth "delights in slightly asymmetrical rotundity, bulk as precious space and platters of fertile surfaces" while another critic found that Rushforth's pots evoked "an atmosphere and expression of spirituality so that each piece, while elegantly functional, becomes also a focus for contemplation." Such comments hail Rushforth's work as a legitimate fine art, worthy of being included in critical discourse. Examining his pieces, one can see that Rushforth finds form intuitively, playing with contemporary variations on traditional forms. He draws influence from Bernard Leach/Hamada Shoji tradition in that there is a pureness and honesty to his work reflective of the great Asian masters. In one review, a critic was quoted, "his work bears the unmistakeable signs of a man trainted to convey through the age-old language of clay, hand, and fire, the ideals of grace, honesty, and inventiveness" (quoted in The Australian, May 1978). Rushforth is a master of his craft, with a remarkable knowledge of glazes, a subtle sense of form, and an artistic ability to create fascinating variations from the simplest themes. He seeks to make fresh statements with his work and fights the notion that pottery can have no function in the sometimes elitist art world.

Charles Nealie, a lively and friendly potter claims that one lifetime is not enough in the endless search among the variable and accidental elements of anagama potting. 'Anagama' refers to a Japanese word meaning cave or single chamber kiln fired by wood usually over several days. Deliberately inefficient and

taking considerable amounts of wood, an anagama kiln will reveal the effects of flam, ash, and vitrification that makes the wares unique.

Nealie says he is never in a hurry to finish a vessel. His overriding delight is in



Chester Nealie. Hagi Glaze Bowl.  
26 cm.

handling the work after it comes off the wheel: rolling, squeezing, stretching, fondling the life forces into this sensuous medium. Larger vessels are coiled and thrown over many days, giving the form the freedom to dictate its own growth. “I make pots

to interrelate with each other and the shape of the anagama kiln. It is in the stacking that further phases in the pots’ narrative are dictated. The seemingly chaotic bundle-stacking and wadding of an anagama kiln is calculated and strategic, yet must be loose and carefree in execution. The size and placement of the wads leave marks in memory of their placement as their flame’s palette paints its complex patterns on the pots” (Castlemaine 2001).

Long wood firing, with its variable atmosphere, puts down layers of color and texture, simulating a natural patina of antiquity. The scars from the interaction of fire on pots and pots on pots are significant parts of the anagama aesthetic.

Another aspect concerns the treatment of the pots when they come from the kiln.

Nealie comments on this: “...Perceiving the elements of arranged chance as

found on the ash-buried pots, and deciding whether to peel back layers or surface to expose other levels, or leave well enough alone, is a decision to be

made for each individual pot. This visual learning is infinite, because all

preconceptions are exposed to chance in every new firing. I have found making,

firing, and discussing with my peers to be most valuable. I have how to play with



Mitsuo Shoji. Stoneware Plate.1998

fire in different ways and to look outside myself to other perception of colors and textures. Refiring dry slip over glaze or glaze over dry ash increases the layering on pots. Mixing these and other

options, such as new clay and slip combinations

and firing down with different atmospheres, creates more wanderings through nature's timeless artifacts: feelings of nature's antiquity, a dash of ritual usage with a hint of the mystery and timelessness of freedom are all melded into the aesthetic of clay and fire."

Mitsuo Shoji immigrated to Australia in 1978. As an Asian-Australian potter, he says, "Sometimes I wonder why I am here in Australia. 20 years have passed since I first came to this country but I believe I am lucky to have the opportunity to live and work here. When I was a student . . . I had a strong urge to go overseas in order to look back on Japan from outside. . . finally I decided to settle in Australia, where the sense of being a new nation is still strong and where I felt there was potential for a ceramist like myself"

([www.australianceramics.com](http://www.australianceramics.com)). Shoji specialized in an array of styles and techniques, always thinking about surface decoration, unlike many purist Asian potters. Shoji often incorporates calligraphic brush strokes of glaze on his work. He is interested in the "marks of human intervention in the landscape,



Mitsuo Shoji  
stoneware, coil-constructed  
37 x 93 cm 2003

scarification and the tradition of the Japanese tattoo” (Castlemaine 2001). Such tattoos wrap around the body and cannot be viewed in full from any one spot. Shoji applies this concept to the decoration of his pots. As one holds one of his vases, for example, one is struck by the geometric inlays that envelop the piece. Often times Shoji will apply luster glazes for an iridescent, shiny, gold-like surface. He believes that ceramic objects have the capability of many expressions and should be used outside the traditional, functional manner at times to emphasize those expressions. Shoji’s work often contains elements of tension, disquiet, clarity, and complexity.

For Bruce Martin, it is the culture and ceramics of Japan that beckons. He and his late wife Estelle have created magnificent natural pots for years. Bruce relates to the Asian methods of pot making and claims that just because an object is useful, that does not mean it cannot be art. The following is an excerpt taken



**Bruce and Estelle Martin**  
woodfired stoneware vessel  
15cm.,

from a written interview with Bruce: “We (speaking of he and his late wife) by our own natures, have been drawn toward naturalness and austerity. It was inevitable for us to visit and look to Japan. During our journey there in 1978, we discovered the kilns which produced the pots we had always, from the start of

our interest in pots, thought of as the ultimate: clay enriched by fire only. At Koderu, Hyogo Prefecture, we met a potter, Sanyo Fujii, who was firing an anagama—a modern style based on the ancient kilns. The beauty of those pots determined us to build such a kiln. With design assistance from Fujii, we were able

to build our own kiln. After our first firing in 1982, we returned to Japan because we realized that we needed help to understand the complexity of loading and firing this large kiln. Our previous experience of firing was with a diesel kiln, firing domestic ware. Even without our fully succeeding with this first firing, Fujii was sufficiently impressed with our endeavors and a selection of the pots, that he came overseas to help us. We were invited to have an exhibition with Fujii in Japan. Fujii's field was tea ceremony wares so we were expected to make the same" (interview March 2004). Bruce lent compelling support to the theory that 'less is more' and to a feeling that pottery finds its fullest expression not in sculptural ornament, but in pieces that hold something. The Martin's have produced their interest in making specialized tradition Japanese anagama pottery where the effects occur as a natural result; the color and patterns build up through flame and ash, deposited during the firing. For Bruce, the challenge of wood firing and anagama kilns continues as "part of myself—an expression of self, a response of the soul. You cannot get the same effects from any other type of firing. I use no applied glazes; the elements do it. That means I don't know what color blending will result until the kiln is cool and emptied"(interview March 2004). The symbolic beauty of vessels made by hand remains the central focus of Bruce's work. The use of nature to produce glaze compliments the handmade aspect and the vessels become so much more than a mere craft object.

Alistair Whyte says his work has Oriental influences, having spent many years in Japan. Whyte especially admires the wares of Song China and the richness and variety of Japanese ceramics. It is not his intent to copy these

works; Whyte merely applies techniques that he has learned in a way unique to



Works by Alistair Whyte. 2000

him and his own feelings of design. His fascination with oriental ceramics dates to his childhood, to his grandmother's house and her collections of Chinese memorabilia. Kyoto is a focal point of high culture within Japan where porcelain has always been the

reserve of the aristocracy; many of the techniques originating in China and Korea have been preserved and unchanged (Castlemaine). Whyte has insisted on keeping his Australian training as his framework and adapted Japanese techniques to suit his style rather than the other way around. Whyte declares, "Obviously the orient has played an influential role in my development thus far, but I have been back in Australia for nearly 10 years and know that there has been a big change in my work over that time. It may not be a road to fortune and fame, but the way of clay and the act of creation is richness that only a potter can understand." (Hughes 1996). One can see Whyte's enthusiasm and dedication to his work. His energy is prominent and the act of creating these vessels is certainly a fine art according to him. Whyte comments on his love for pottery: "I find clay sensual, especially the fine pure porcelains. It is probably the act of turning clay on the wheel that gives me the most satisfaction, as well as the challenge of a material such as porcelain that does not have great natural plasticity. Then there is the meditative aspect of designing and carving the tools necessary in the making process. And the patience needed, that is learnt from making, drying and turning and finally firing a kiln, sometimes a month from start



to completion; and then there is the sense of having created an object of beauty when you pick up a small blue and white bowl from the kiln and the light shines through between your fingers. My desire is to continue being challenged by this material and to go on creating objects in clay..." (Castlemaine 2001).

As a general statement, artist-potters in Australia place themselves within the realm of the Fine Arts discourse; however, other Fine Artists often refuse to acknowledge that placement. The persistence of these potters might pay off in the long run, gaining them a respected position somewhere in between the separate realms of craft and fine art. Just as sculptors and painters seek to cross boundaries of medium as well as culture, potters seek to blend the lines of craft and fine art. Each artist has his own agenda regarding his life's work. In Australia, those agendas are merging and individual artists are coming together in a common theme: that of cultural openness and exchange. As Australia continues to search for a unique national identity, its artists will continually seek to establish a unique multicultural discourse in which Australia's place in the Asian-Pacific region is embraced rather than rejected. Throughout a dark history of harsh racism, painful rejection and poor communication, the relationship between many Asian countries and Australia is beginning to change. No doubt the artist, evermore a commentator and reflector of society, will continue to play a vital role in the formation of this new era of contemporary global art.

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